

Matter 26

Summary

Past versus Present

Account by:	Claire Fawcette, 41. Wedding planner.
Source:	The Waking Dead cache.
Location:	Malvern Hills, England.
Event:	3 May 2024.
Report:	8 May 2024.

Report



Claire Fawcette



8 May 2024 at 11:46 • 🗣️

My story happened Friday last.

I'm a wedding planner, and I was checking out a venue in the Malvern Hills just after lunch. Some of these big, fancy houses are quite remote, and although I passed an occasional building as I neared my destination, I – or rather my SatNav, I hadn't a clue where I was myself – was basically

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following a single-track road with fields either side, criss-crossed by public footpaths.

There were no other vehicles around, which was fortunate because I don't know how we'd have passed each other. There were, however, pedestrians: two men, to be precise, in the middle of the road. They looked to be squaring up to each other, angrily.

The pair were dressed in ankle-length robes and had a Middle-Eastern look to them. My immediate thought was that they were new immigrants who had fled from some fearful conflict or other, so perhaps I shouldn't interfere. However, they were blocking the road and I needed to get past for my 2:15 appointment.

Suspecting that I might have to ask them to move, I lowered my window. It transpired they were shouting at each other quite aggressively, which meant I was privy to their conversation.

The gist of it seemed to be that one of them – a squat little fellow, I didn't like him – wanted the whole world brought to a halt and restarted as it was 5,000 years ago. Well dream on! The other man, who was accompanied by a small, red dog of some kind, was telling him that he was wrong and there was much to learn here.

I have to say, there wasn't a great deal of depth to their discussion, the exchange being a series of repetitions of the same points in different words.

Eventually, I lost patience and called out politely to ask if they would mind moving out of the way. The man with the dog began to acquiesce but the other man grabbed him by the arm and told him to ignore me, I was nothing.

I didn't take kindly to this. Recalling a trip to Cairo in my youth, where people use car horns far more frequently than we do, I thought perhaps he might respond better if I honked him, so I did.

With that, he stormed over to me. I always keep the doors locked when I'm driving, but the window was only a third closed when he arrived. He reached in and grabbed me by the throat. The window has an anti-trap feature that stops it from closing when it hits an obstacle, so that was that.

I could still breathe, even though he had a grip of iron. I tried to start the engine, but by then he had me with both hands and was pulling my head towards the door.

The other Middle-Easterner had arrived by now and was trying to pull my assailant off me. I don't know how that worked out, however, because at

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that point my attacked twisted my head and I heard a snap. I think he broke my neck.

Suddenly, I was back home in Worcester, in my bed and fully clothed. I thought I'd gone mad.

I went outside to my car, but it wasn't there. I phoned the venue telling them I was going to be late due to very unforeseen circumstances, then I summoned a cab. On the way, the police called to let me know my BMW was causing an obstruction and would shortly be towed away at my expense. Thinking quickly, I told them it had been stolen and thanked them for finding it so quickly; they were caught on the back foot by this, so I won't be getting any points on my licence. The paperwork I had to fill in was very tiresome, though.

This is why I was so pleased to find this new Facebook group. I thought perhaps my car HAD been stolen and my mind had concocted the whole incident as some kind of deranged response to it. I'm so glad to learn that it isn't just me!

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1 

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Mark Cranshaw

Great story – exactly the kind of experience I was hoping to hear about here. Thanks for sharing!

Like Reply Share 1w

Notes

Claire Fawcette has only been a wedding planner since March 2023, following the wedding of her daughter Kiri. Prior to that, she was a store manager at Lidl.

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Matter 27

Summary

The Judgement of Laura Thorndyke

Account by:	Laura Thorndyke, 23. Civil engineer.
Source:	Søndergaard & Bang.
Location:	Longview, Texas, United States.
Event:	6 May 2024.
Report:	6 May 2024.

Report

[Participants:

1/LT Laura Thorndyke

Insertion – 84

Primary subject.

2/JJ Jacob Jackson

Natural – 103966194470

Boyfriend of 1/LT.

]

[Clip starts 4088 318 18:44]

2/JJ Hi, Laura, sorry I'm late.

1/LT Hi, Jake. Traffic problems?

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JLT

- 2/JJ No, I got into a Zoom call with a client in LA and it just went on and on. How was your day?
- 1/LT Weird.
- 2/JJ Weird? In what way?
- 1/LT Very weird. Are you getting a cold drink? Bring me one too, would you?
- 2/JJ Coke OK?
- 1/LT Do we have any of the ginger?
- 2/JJ One can left, you want it?
- 1/LT Please ... ah, thanks sweetie.
- 2/JJ So, your weird day.
- 1/LT Right. Well it wasn't *all* the day, just the start, the drive in.
- 2/JJ I heard something about an accident on Loop 281 at Gilmer Road, you got caught up in that?
- 1/LT I didn't see it happen, but traffic came to a standstill. Police, fire, ambulance – I was half-expecting mountain rescue and the coastguard to show up as well, it must have been a bad one.
- 2/JJ Aw, honey, how long were you stuck there?
- 1/LT Best part of an hour, but that's not ... that isn't the weird thing.
- 2/JJ Are you going to tell me the weird thing?
- 1/LT Promise not to call me crazy?
- 2/JJ Of course. Doesn't mean you're *not* crazy, of course, but in my experience it's best not to argue with crazy people anyway.
- 1/LT (laughs) OK, so I was sitting there, wishing I

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- was on the McDonald's side of the road so I could get a shake or something, when this guy appeared in the passenger seat.
- 2/JJ Appeared? What do you mean, 'appeared'?
- 1/LT One moment he wasn't there. Next moment he was.
- 2/JJ I thought you kept the doors locked?
- 1/LT I do! He didn't come in through the door, he like teleported or something!
- 2/JJ I'm beginning to wish I hadn't promised not to call you crazy.
- 1/LT This is serious, Jake! I'm not joking. I looked over the road at McDonald's and a second later there was a guy sitting next to me, wearing some kind of outfit made of fur.
- 2/JJ What? That makes no – what did you do?
- 1/LT Same as you would have done: let out a scream so loud I thought the windshield was going to shatter.
- 2/JJ Did you go for your handgun? Oh, it's the in glove compartment, right...
- 1/LT I tried to open the door to get out but it wouldn't move. I mean, I could pull the handle but the door was somehow held shut, so I hammered on the windows, trying to attract the attention of the girl in the vehicle alongside, but it didn't make any noise. I mean I was *beating* that window, why didn't it make any noise?
- 2/JJ How old was this guy? What did he look

like? Had you seen him before?

- 1/LT Maybe in his 50s or 60s? He was kind of, I don't know, Iranian or Indian or something, he had an English accent. No, I hadn't seen him before. I don't want to see him again.
- 2/JJ They do have Indians in England, something to do with the British Empire, I think.
- 1/LT The guy said he was called William, that's not an Indian name.
- 2/JJ It's not an Iranian name, either.
- 1/LT Whatever, it was *his* name. He told me he was a judge and that he wanted to know what I thought about some place, Day something-or-other, I've never heard of it.
- 2/JJ Did you tell him that?
- 1/LT No, I was still trying to get out of the car, cursing him and telling him to release me or I'd call the cops, they were right there down the highway, they could be there in seconds. He wouldn't listen, or maybe it was me who wouldn't listen, whatever, I called 911 and then my phone went dead too.
- 2/JJ Dead? You had it on charge all night.
- 1/LT I know, right? The guy told me he only wanted me to answer some questions then he'd go and everything would be back to normal.
- 2/JJ This is like something out of a Sci-Fi movie.
- 1/LT I was getting more like Horror vibes myself. It was freaky, *real* freaky. I felt powerless, like the universe had stopped

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- working or something. I was scared, Jake, real, heart-pounding, fight-or-flight scared.
- 2/JJ Do you want a whisky with that ginger?
- 1/LT No, no, I'm good, thanks. So the guy, William he said his – oh, I already told you that – so William asked me what I thought about the world.
- 2/JJ What, in general?
- 1/LT I don't know, I told him I didn't understand, I wanted him to let me out, I hadn't done anything wrong. I was begging him, but he just sat there and told me he'd be gone once I'd answered the questions.
- 2/JJ So ... you answered the questions?
- 1/LT I didn't have any choice. He asked again, what did I think about the world, so I said it could be better, it has a lot of problems right now – wars, global warming, hunger, Republicans – but on the whole it's OK. Then he asked me what I thought of the people and I said that most are good folk, it's just the odd handful with mental problems like Putin that make it bad for the rest of us.
- 2/JJ Did he touch you, or harm you in any way?
- 1/LT No, he just ... sat there, asking his questions. He had a few more about visitors and video games, I couldn't really follow what he meant, then he asked me a couple of doozies.

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JLT

- 2/JJ You were calm at this point?
1/LT I was close to peeing myself in fear, so no, I wasn't calm. I just wanted the guy to leave so I could wake up – it was like a bizarre nightmare.
- 2/JJ What was doozie number 1?
1/LT "Are people people?"
2/JJ That ... sounds like an easy "yes".
1/LT It was. I told him it was true by definition. He apparently didn't mean what I thought he meant, though; he said the translation must have got the wrong word.
- 2/JJ The translation?
1/LT That's what he said. Then he explained that what he meant was, are the people who live here, in this world, people in the same sense that he was.
- 2/JJ Well I guess creepy deviants *are* people, yes.
1/LT I asked what he meant by "in the same sense that he was". He said he meant people from reality. I told him that this is reality, at which point he seemed surprised and thought for a while.
- 2/JJ How long a while?
1/LT Quite a few seconds – ten, fifteen?
2/JJ You could have gone for your handgun.
1/LT I didn't *know* it was going to take him ten seconds when he started. Besides, if he can lock doors and discharge phones, I'm guessing he could have stopped a gun from firing.

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2/JJ I take your point. It's like that guy out of *Westworld*, the one played by Anthony Hopkins, stopping the world with a thought.

1/LT Robert Ford, was that his character? Anyway, when William came out of his period of pondering, he apologised for –

2/JJ Wait, he *apologised*?

1/LT Yes, he said he was sorry, he thought I knew.

2/JJ Knew what?

1/LT He didn't say, he just carried on and asked me doozie number 2.

2/JJ Which was?

1/LT Should the world exist?

2/JJ I hope you answered in the affirmative.

1/LT Well duh! Of course I did! Then he asked me "Why?", so I told him because if it *didn't* then neither would I, neither would you, neither would he, neither would anybody.

2/JJ Good answer.

1/LT He didn't think so. He said he'd exist regardless of whether Day-whatever, here, existed or not. I told him, OK, well would he relish the prospect of not existing some other way? He thought about it for a few seconds and said that no, he wouldn't look forward to not existing.

2/JJ No-one wants to die.

1/LT Then, I said to him that I knew I wouldn't

exist at some point in the future, but before that point I wanted to live. I wanted to have children, to see them grow up and have children of their own, to do good, to make the world a better place.

2/JJ An even better place.

1/LT I should have said that, shouldn't I?

2/JJ How did he take it?

1/LT He wasn't convinced, so I tried another tack. I asked him where he came from.

2/JJ England?

1/LT No, he said reality.

2/JJ Let me guess: another translation issue?

1/LT I don't know, could be. Anyway, I asked him if the place he came from should exist. He straight away said that yes, it should. I said that for the same reasons his world should exist, so should our world.

2/JJ Did that sway him?

1/LT Not at all. He said our world was only a construct, it wasn't real. I asked him how he knew *his* world wasn't also only a construct and wasn't real. *That* seemed to have an impact.

2/JJ What? Hasn't everyone wondered at some point in their lives that if God created the universe, who created God?

1/LT Not in his universe, apparently. That was the end of his questions, anyway. He thanked me for my time and disappeared.

2/JJ Disappeared how?

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- 1/LT By not being there. How else can I explain it? Disappeared is disappeared! I felt a slight rush of air as it moved to fill the gap where he'd been. He just ... popped right out of it
- 2/JJ You could open the door now, though?
- 1/LT Yes, I could have joined all the other people who'd got out of their vehicles to risk being hit by a paramedic on a motorcycle. There was a helicopter came, did I tell you that? Landed right in the middle of the inter-section. Oh, my phone was back on full charge, too, but I didn't call 911 because the police weren't going to promise up front not to call me crazy.
- 2/JJ How do you explain any of what happened?
- 1/LT I can't. It just happened. I told you it was weird.
- 2/JJ Could it have been like a street hypnotist messing with your mind or something?
- 1/LT One who owned a gold mine, yes.
- 2/JJ What do you mean?
- 1/LT Before he went, William gave me this.
- 2/JJ What is it?
- 1/LT Gold. That's what comes out of gold mines.
- 2/JJ It's – you're right, it is gold.
- 1/LT I know, I showed Dave and Brian, they weighed it and calculated its density. It's 24 carat, absolutely pure.
- 2/JJ This is – it's a cube. Is that your name there?
- 1/LT Yes, Laura Thorndyke in tiny little sticky-

out letters.

2/JJ How much does this weigh?

1/LT Just over eleven ounces. It's worth about eighteen thousand dollars.

2/JJ Eighteen *thousand*?

1/LT Maybe a shade more, but I can't see a hall mark so there may be a problem selling it.

2/JJ Do you want to sell it?

1/LT Yes, Jake, I do want to sell it. Why would I not want to sell it?

2/JJ Well, it's got your name on it.

1/LT That's not eighteen thousand dollars' worth of reason to keep it.

2/JJ Aren't you worried that this William guy might show up again and ask you what you did with it?

1/LT No. If he's that bothered, he can give me another one. He made it out of nothing! He just opened his hand and there it was. He can do it once, he can do it again.

2/JJ We're going to have to think about this.

1/LT Not me, not right now. I've had enough weirdness for today. I'm going to binge-watch *Black Mirror* on Netflix instead.

(doorbell rings)

1/LT What? Who's that? Did you order anything from Amazon?

2/JJ No, I don't think so – I'll go see who it is.

[Clip ends 4088 318 18:53]

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Notes

Contributed by Martin Søndergaard and Lillian Bang as part of our accord.

Their organisation is aware of Laura Thorndyke's bot status and has installed surveillance equipment in her home. This is a transcript of a conversation she had with her boyfriend, Jacob Jackson.

Matter 28

Summary

Suicide is Painful

Account by:	Samantha Alexis Johnson, 27. Administrator.
Source:	The Waking Dead cache.
Location:	Grand Canyon, Arizona.
Event:	5 May 2024.
Report:	18 May 2024.

Report



Samantha Alexis Johnson



18 May 2024 at 16:17 · 🗨️

Don't ever kill yourself. The "M*A*S*H" theme, "Suicide is Painless" – it's bullshit. Suicide isn't painless – it hurts like hell and you'll regret it every moment that your brain is shutting down. I've done it. I know.

I've been in a bad place for years. Feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, that I could do nothing right. A shit life, working in the back office for a

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shit casino in a shit off-strip part of Vegas, which itself is a shit, hollow city. I had shit hours, spent with shit workmates (especially YOU, Emily Delana) and a shit boss who kept piling on the shit work giving me shit, impossible deadlines.

I lived in a shit apartment with my shit boyfriend, until he left me back in March to move in with a shit boyfriend of his own. I couldn't make rent on my shit wages, and although my landlord (who's one of the few people in Vegas who isn't shit – probably because he lives in Oakland) gave me a month rent-free to find another roomie, no-one but shit-headed creeps answered the ads.

It sounds as if I'm whining. "Buck your ideas up, Sam", you're thinking. That's unless you've been there. Then, you'll know. I felt trapped, helpless, overwhelmed. Nothing I did was ever enough, all my attempts to make matters better only made them worse. My mind was wading through molasses. I struggled making decisions, put them off until someone made them for me. What did it matter? The outcome was going to be shit whatever.

It weighs on you. It invades your dreams – that's if you can get any sleep to begin with. I lost interest in everything. Life was one joyless day after another. Little moments of happiness, little

moments of beauty – gone. Socially, I just went through the motions. If other people laughed, I laughed. Someone must have said something funny.

It's exhausting. I felt sooo tired. There's no light at the end of the tunnel. It keeps on going forever, suffocating you. You just want it to end.

Therapists, not that I could afford one, like to ask if you've had any suicidal thoughts. They know shit. No, my thoughts weren't about suicide – they were about freedom, about release, about taking control of my life, if only for a few sacred seconds until the badness went away forever. I sought peace, nothing more, but peace wouldn't come.

In the end, couldn't take it. I just wanted out.

I chose the Grand Canyon to make my exit. It has pretty views, South Rim, sun behind my back. I looked it up: a fall from there would give me twenty whole seconds of blessed liberty, all my cares dissolving back into the shit, shit place they came from, thereupon to be replaced by a world of calm, perpetual tranquillity.

I chose May 5th to do it. Cinco de Mayo, a Sunday, it wouldn't be so busy. I could make my way past the park boundaries to somewhere quiet, out of the way, no interfering, do-good witnesses to stop me.

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The rangers would see me on their cameras, sure, but too late to prevent me from casting off at last the unbearable, relentless depression that was crushing my soul.

For the first time in maybe ten, fifteen years, I felt I had some agency in my life.

I didn't make a fuss. I went to the edge, sheer drop. I closed my eyes and fell forwards, arms outstretched, like an eagle.

For three, four seconds, I felt the years of hurt and pain evaporate behind me. I was free, I was me, and I would be for the rest of my life.

Then, some shit-for-brains grabbed me.

My confusion was replaced moments later by extreme anger. My last moments on planet Earth had been ruined by a passing mountaineer with a grip of iron? What the actual fuck?!

Yes, he had that Middle-Eastern look about him, case you're wondering. There were four similar guys with him, too. All had climbing gear on, though, not the Jesus robes.

I asked him what the fuck he was playing at and demanded that he let me go like right NOW.

He wondered if I knew what would happen if he did.

I said yes, I was going to go full-on Wile E. Coyote on the canyon floor, why the fuck would I have jumped if I didn't know that?

He asked if I was sure.

I started to struggle and told him just to butt the fuck out and let me die in peace.

He did as requested and I fell.

I was furious that he'd ruined my moment. All my feelings of uselessness returned. I was such a worthless piece of meat that I couldn't even die properly.

I was in tears when I hit the ground. A shit end to a shit, shit life.

My spine shattered. My hips shattered. My skull shattered. Fuck but it hurt. I couldn't move, I couldn't breathe, I couldn't see. Might have been able to hear.

I was in agony, worst feeling ever. It lasted for what, three minutes, seemed an eternity, until

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finally I got the release I craved. It was as if I'd drifted off to sleep.

Then, I woke up back in my shit apartment, right as rain.

Shit.

Same drill as for the rest of you. Car where I left it, the wall clock showing the exact time my mind had shut down.

I was livid, incensed, but perhaps because of this I'd retained the feeling of agency I'd so desperately desired. Pressures and obligations that had been crushing me since forever meant nothing to me now. I should have been dead – I'd wanted to be dead – but I wasn't.

The world didn't give a shit about me, but now, NOW, I didn't give a shit about the world, either.

My shit boss fired me, but like I cared?

I packed a few things, paid off my rent with what was left of my savings, recovered my car from the pound, headed for Phoenix. Slept in a parking lot outside a run-down diner. No-one bothered me.

Next day, I applied for an admin job in a storage space company. Got it. Borrowed some money from the bank to rent an apartment, started the following week. My boss is great, the people are great, the pay is great, the working conditions are great. I'll soon have health insurance, first time in my life. Phoenix is authentic. I feel ... liberated.

It won't last – I know it won't last. The negative emotions will work their way back, creeping through the cracks of my consciousness. Fleeting thoughts I can currently dismiss will grab me and punch me, I won't be able to fend them off forever. I'll feel incapable, that I'm letting everyone down, that I can't cope with my life. It's going to happen, it's inevitable. That's how depression works.

Yet I know that this state also won't last. I know now that I have the strength to keep going. I know that I can survive it. I'll see it through and emerge a better, more empowered me. Not caring gives you that kind of freedom.

No way will I let it kill me, though. No fucking way.



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Claire Fawcette

Non-suicide deaths are also painful.
Having your neck snapped certainly is!

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Naiomi Murdoch

Oh Samantha , you poor thing. Thank you for such an inspirational post. I've suffered from mental health problems all my life and know exactly how you feel. Stay strong, we're rooting for you. X X X

Like Reply Share 6d



Rita Deng

I echo what Naiomi said, it takes courage to admit to something like this. You have an inner strength that you're only now coming to realise you possess. I have family in Prescott, let's hook up next time I visit. Stay strong, stay you. If you ever need to talk, just call. I'll FM you my number.

Like Reply Share 6d



Mark Cranshaw

Powerful story, Samantha. If you ever find yourself with nowhere to turn, do get in touch – really. You have friends here.

Like Reply Share 6d



Cindy Watson

This resonated with me so much. OMG, that line about not giving a shit about the world! I'm going to frame it. Nice people care too much about a world that doesn't care one whit about them. Next time the shadow begins to fall, prepare and hold tight until it passes. The good times don't last forever, but neither do the bad times. From now on, believe me, the good ones will last the longer.

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Notes

None.

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Summary

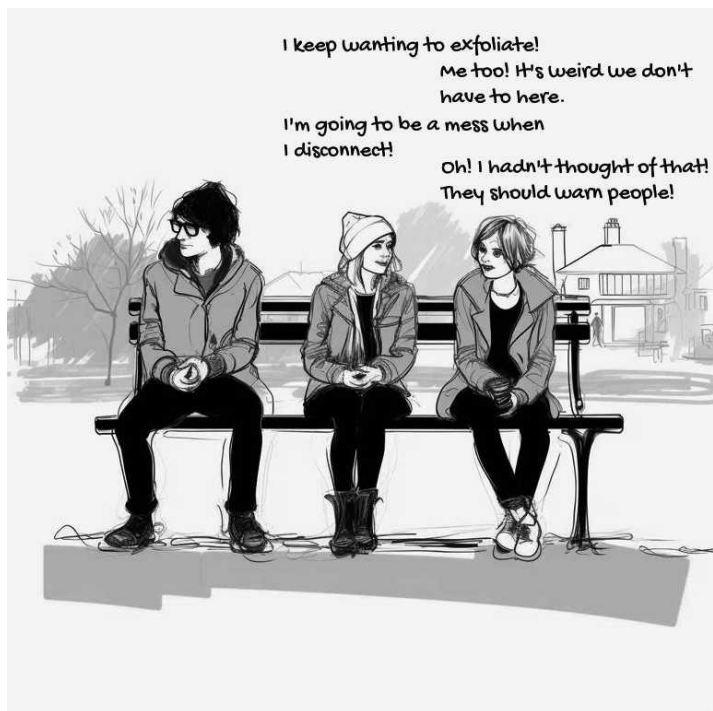
Platt Fields Park

Account by:	Donovan Myrtles, 31. Cartoonist.
Source:	Web comic.
Location:	Platt Fields Park, Manchester, England.
Event:	6 May 2024.
Report:	27 May 2024.

Report



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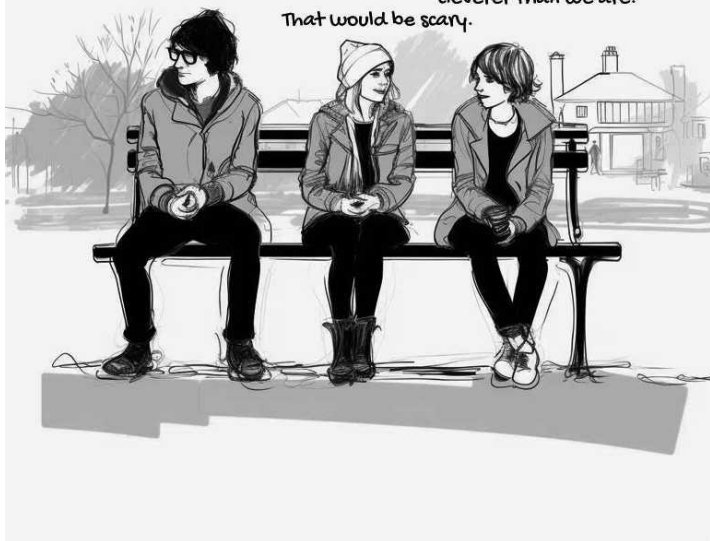
Have you interacted with any
NPCs yet?

Only one. He said he was in a
hurry then left.

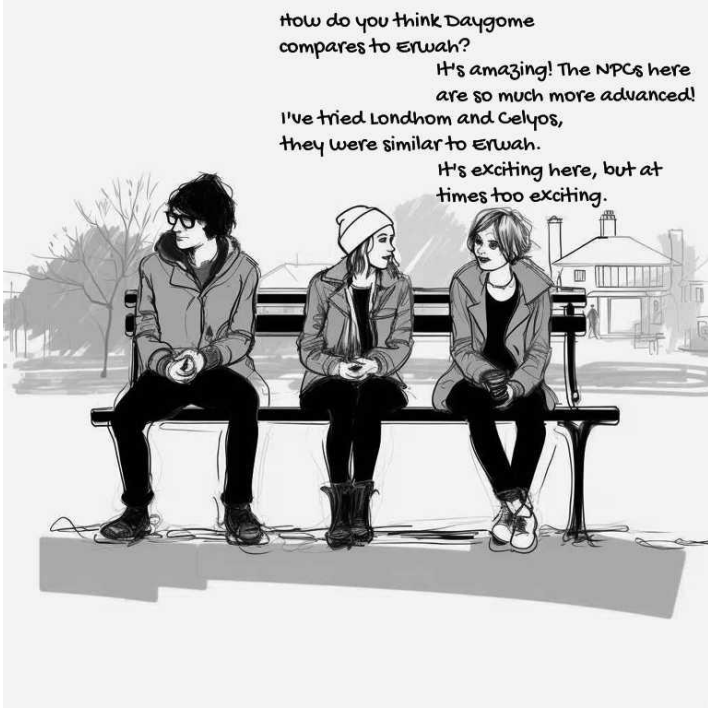
They're very clever!

Some people say they're
cleverer than we are.

That would be scary.



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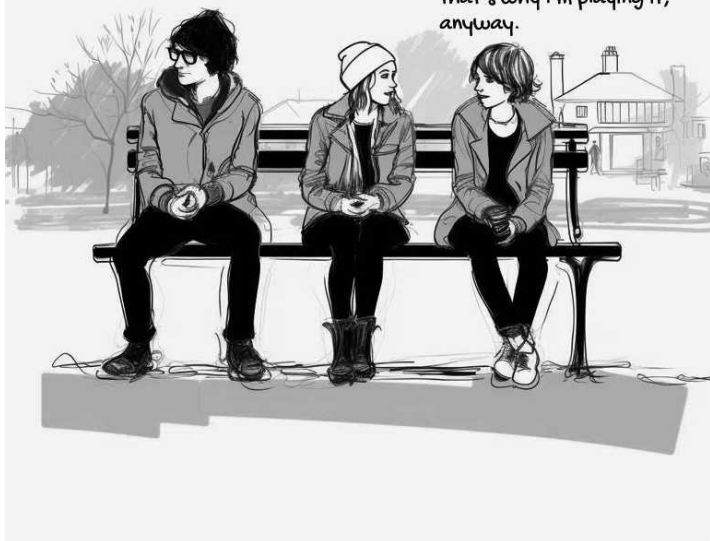


There are many visitors here,
even though it's very expensive.

People want to see what all
the fuss is about.

Before it's closed, yes.

That's why I'm playing it,
anyway.



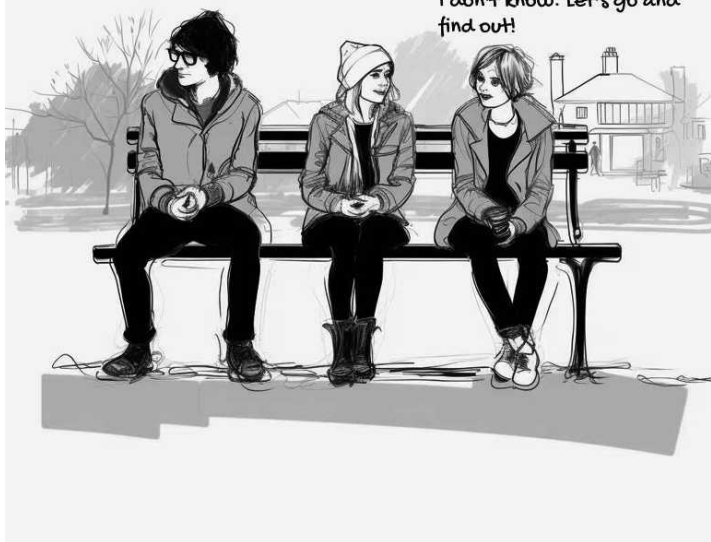
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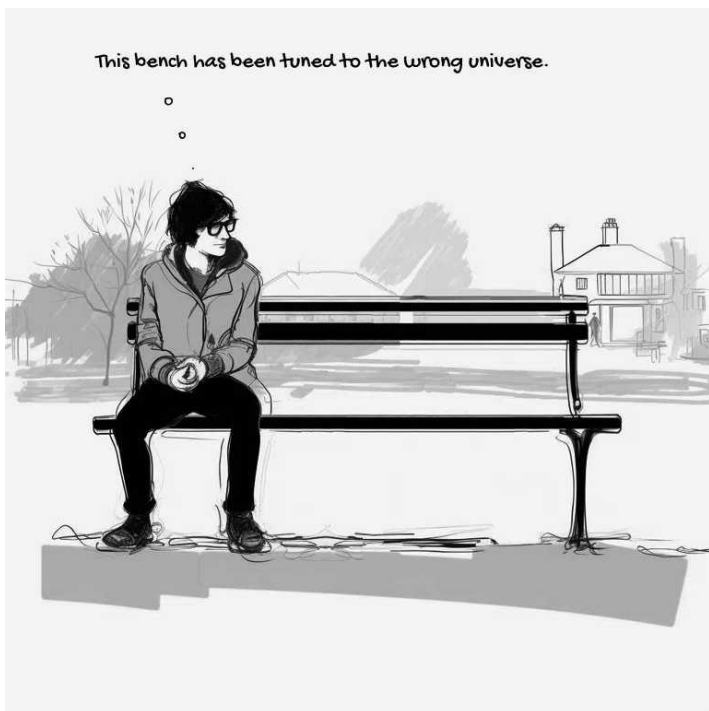
Shall we go and watch a war?

I don't like wars. I prefer
watching children playing.

Do the children here behave
like the children in reality?

I don't know. Let's go and
find out!





Notes

Taken from the *Eavesdropper* comic's web site.

Mr Myrtles confirmed by email that the event took place 6 May 2024; he draws his comics three weeks in advance to allow for intermittences in source material availability and for holidays.

Summary

Brigitte by the Stream

Account by:	Lucas Veillot, 24. Farm labourer.
Source:	My-Diary.org public diary.
Location:	Les Eyzies, France.
Event:	8 May 2024.
Report:	8 May 2024.

Report

2024-05-08 19:12:16 (UTC)

I had an early start to work today, but an early finish, too. My mother was not due back from Périgueux for another two hours, but it was a pleasant day so I decided to enjoy a walk along the Promenade de la Vézère.

I met other people who had had the same idea, mainly older folk walking their dogs or simply savouring the sunshine. The river was busy with canoes and kayaks, which is good for the village

but it spoils the view. At the end of the promenade, I made my way to the stream, La Beune, which winds between the backs of the houses and businesses on the Rue du Moulin. No canoes go there, and few people, either, because it involves some small acts of trespass. I like it: it is pretty, shady and quiet. There are usually dragonflies and sometimes kingfishers.

Today, there was a girl.

She sat on the bank of the stream, with her feet in the water. She was wearing robes, but was not a nun or a novice. She was aged around 20, perhaps a little younger. She had dark hair and looked to be of Arab origin.

She was crying.

I know it is dangerous for a man to approach a young woman when there is no witness, for it is easy to misinterpret his motives and he can be accused of many things. I also know it is very concerning to a young woman to be approached by a man in such circumstances, for such accusations, often have merit. The sensible action would have been to pass by at a distance.

However, I felt compassion for the girl. She was upset. She looked to be in need of a hug, but of course that was not possible. Still, I could not let

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her suffer alone, so I went up to her, making sure she saw me and it would not be a surprise.

"Good afternoon, miss", I said.

She looked up at me, her lower lip trembling. She said nothing.

"Is something the matter?" I asked her.

Cautiously, she nodded. She wiped her tears on her sleeve, then glanced briefly at it in disappointment.

"Would you like to tell me about it?" I asked.

She nodded again, tentatively.

I approached and sat down next to her, but not so close that she might think I was a threat. I made sure my feet were not in the water.

"What is your name?" I asked her.

She paused, then answered, nervously: "Brigitte".

She seemed surprised, as if she had never heard her own voice before.

"Pleased to meet you, Brigitte", I said, smiling. "I am Lucas".

I held my hand out. She stared at it, as if she had no clue that I was prompting her to shake it.

"Why are you crying, Brigitte?" I asked.

"I have made a mistake", she answered, still unsure of her voice. "I had heard that this place was wondrous, I very much wanted to see it before it was closed. I spent all my money to get here, but now I am here I am lost and I know nobody and I see I am a fool."

Her French was fluent, but with an English accent. She seemed sincere, so I believed her. "Have you come far, Brigitte?"

"I, that is, I cannot." She stopped. "The question is difficult to answer."

She was struggling, that was certain. "Then tell me where you live", I suggested.

"A place called Hillwood."

"Where is that? There is no Hillwood nearby."

"Reality", she replied.

I knew I had to be careful now. Whatever was troubling her, it was causing her not to think

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straight, "Can I help you to find your way home?" I asked.

"I can return whenever I wish", she replied, "but my life is ruined. I have no money. I shall wait here and cry until my time runs out."

She looked so sad. I very much wanted to hug her, to help her feel better, but I knew it would not help her feel better. My hugs never make people feel better.

"I have some savings", I said. I knew it was a risk, that she could be a trickster, but I felt she wasn't. "I can give you some money, if you would like."

She smiled. She was pretty when she smiled. "I cannot use your money in Reality", she said. "I can only use the money of Reality, but I have spent all mine."

"What income have you?" I asked.

"I work making food", she replied, "but I will not be paid for another four weeks. I will not be able to eat or to drink or to use transport."

"Have you friends you could borrow money from?"

She looked at me, blankly. "Money can be borrowed?"

"Yes, of course!" I replied.

She thought for a while, then shook her head. "I have no friends who would lend such a thing as money. I am not popular. I thought that if I came here, this would make me popular, but I was a fool. It was too expensive and I have spent all my money. They will laugh at me, they will not let me take, er, borrow their money."

"The food you make, what is it?" I asked, trying to change the subject. Talking about her problem was causing her to start to cry again.

"I cut bread and put butter on it. Then, customers tell me what they want on top of the butter. I put these items on the butter then they give me money. The money goes to the shop owner then every month she pays me for my work.

"Nothing goes on top of the toppings?"

"Customers can add seasoning. We charge nothing for seasoning."

"What kinds of toppings are available?"

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"The same as in all the food-making shops. Meat and cheese and slices of the plants that are in season."

"They are the same in *all* the food-making shops?" That seemed to me to be strange.

"It is dangerous to experiment when people have no reason to change."

"I see. So, could you ask the shop owner to pay you in advance? Then you would have enough money to live on and could begin to save again."

Again, she looked uncomprehending. "I cannot be paid for time I have not worked."

I wondered if perhaps sitting with her feet in the stream was not helping her frame of mind. "Your shoes are going to be ruined", I said, nodding at them.

She sighed. "The shoes here are not waterproof. The fabric is not waterproof. Nothing works like it should work. Things are not the same as they are in Reality."

"Are you hungry?" I asked. I could not let her sit with her feet in a river all afternoon. "Or thirsty? We could have a coffee. I know a nice café nearby."

"I have no need to eat or drink here", she said.
"Only in Reality."

"Are there many people here from the place you call Reality?" I asked.

"Some thousands, but I have not met any. I am lost. I appeared in a cave then the people there made me leave."

"These other people from Reality, they also have no need to eat or to drink?"

"None of the people from Reality need to eat or to drink here."

"How long can you stay here before you have to leave?" I asked.

"I have paid for another hour, I think. Then I must return and have no way to pay for food or drink or transport to where I work. It is a long way from my home and I will have to walk."

"Wait here", I instructed. "I shall be back soon."

"I will wait", she said. "You have been kind to me. Nobody is ever kind to me."

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Fifteen minutes later, I returned with a sandwich. Brigitte was where I had left her, her feet still in the water. She was sobbing quietly to herself.

"Brigitte?" I said, to announce my arrival. "I have brought you this." I showed her the sandwich.

Brigitte stopped crying for a moment and looked at it. "What is it?" she asked.

"It is a sandwich", I replied. "It is food."

"I told you that I have no need to eat in this place", she replied, disappointedly.

"You told me no-one from where you come from has a need to eat here", I added. "Therefore, only you will have encountered a sandwich."

"What is a sandwich?" she asked, as if the word was in her vocabulary but she had no knowledge of what it meant.

"Look", I said, peeling back the top slice of bread. "This part here is the same as what you make in your food shop. This part here is like the bottom part, but it goes on the top."

The tears of Brigitte had now ceased. She frowned and looked at the sandwich. "What is it for?" she asked.

"When people eat the food you make, they use their hands, yes? Not cutlery?"

"Yes", she replied.

"Must they be careful not to get any of the butter or ingredients on their fingers?"

"Very", she answered, emphatically.

"Would they like more ingredients but are afraid they would fall off?"

"They ... would!" Brigitte was beginning to see the utility of sandwiches.

"By using two slices of bread, you can put more ingredients between the slices and people can hold them without getting butter on their fingers."

She stared at the sandwich. "This idea will make me rich!" she announced. "Oh! But I still have no money. I will starve before I become rich."

"The bread, butter and ingredients and the time to make one are slightly less than for two ordinary food items", I said. "You can charge your customers

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three times as much for a sandwich as for your normal fare, then give half the excess to the shop owner and keep half for yourself. Thus, you will have income immediately."

She looked at me, then the sandwich in wonder. "Can I try it?" She held out her hand.

"I thought you had no need to eat here", I replied, passing it to her.

"I have no need to eat here, but I can eat here." She held the sandwich carefully with both hands, then slowly bit into it.

Her eyes widened.

She chewed, then swallowed, then took another bite.

While she was chewing, she looked at the sandwich again, taking off the top slice of bread and peering inside. Some of the tomato fell out.

She looked into my eyes.

I smiled. I could tell she was grateful.

Slowly, she shuffled along the bank of the stream until she was sitting adjacent to me, then she leaned on my arm.

I moved it, while she happily took another bite from her sandwich.

I hugged her.

Notes

Translated from the French by Melanie Scott.